

Scholars East and West

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The great contribution of China to politics was the development of a bureaucratic, meritocratic civil service, based on mastery of a well-defined canon of scholarship. Civil servants were scholars. Already under the Han dynasty, Confucianism (the *Rújiā* or school of the scholars) was made the official ideology of the State and the basis of the competitive examination system. Europe was less advanced in political organization than China. Rulers and their courts relied on family ties and brute force. The only working bureaucracy belonged to the Catholic Church. This paper follows the parallel development of both the Western and the Chinese traditions and emphasizes their points of intersection, such as the Jesuit missions to China in the 16th and 17th centuries and the visits of Bertrand Russell and John Dewey around 1920.

Writing and Bureaucracy

Writing arose in the fourth millennium BC in Sumer (Mesopotamia) to meet the needs of the incipient commerce and bureaucracy. The writing of numbers preceded the full writing of language. The merchants used hollow clay balls (*bullae*) that contained ‘tokens’ or smaller pieces of clay representing the number and type of objects sent. They ‘signed’ the balls by rolling their personal cylinder seals on the surface of the clay ball. When the merchandise arrived at destination, the clay ball was broken and the number indicated by the tokens was compared with the amount received. Similarly, the goods supplied to the temple stores (or withdrawn from them) and the periodic inventories were recorded by inscribing on clay the numbers and types of things stored.¹

By 3200 BC, an almost complete writing of language appeared in the city of Uruk (in Sumer) and shortly afterwards in Egypt. Later on, writing arose independently in China and among the Mayas of Mesoamerica. The first bureaucracies developed in Sumer and Egypt. From the beginning, they made use of writing. The systems of writing were not easy to use. On the contrary, they were complex and difficult techniques, inaccessible to the common folk. Only the scribes, the professionals of the complex and arcane technology of writing, were able to read and write. The first bureaucrats were all scribes. They were proud of their skill, as shown in the magnificent portraits of Egyptian seated scribes that have come down to us.²

The Phoenicians of Ugarit and other harbours of the East-Mediterranean coast were ingenious and entrepreneurial merchants and sailors. They simplified drastically the previous systems of writing in order to expedite the recording of their commercial transactions. They introduced consonant letters and a semi-alphabetic consonantal writing. The old Greeks adopted this Phoenician consonantal system and completed it with the introduction of vowels. In this way they invented Alphabetic writing. They also invented democracy. Both inventions were closely related. Alphabetic writing was so easy to learn by everyone that a specialized caste of scribes was no longer necessary. Everyone could read the laws and participate in the political debate.

The oldest preserved Chinese writing is found in the divinatory texts incised into the oracle bones (turtle shells and ox scapulae) of the Shang dynasty, in the second millennium BC. In the following centuries, different styles of writing developed in China, like the 'metal script' of the Zhou. When Qin Shihuangdi unified China, his Prime Minister, Li Si, standardized many aspects of culture, including writing. Li Si, a great calligrapher himself, is credited with inventing the unified lesser seal (*xiǎozhuàn*) style of writing. The style evolved to become the scribal, the regular traditional and even (since the 1950s) the simplified Chinese script.³

Not only the script, but also the language itself, reflected in the inscriptions, changed with time and convention. Traditionally Chinese scholars had written in the old classical language. Hu Shi and other modernizing intellectuals of the 20th century promoted the adoption by literature and bureaucracy of the vernacular language, especially the *Baihua* or spoken dialect of Beijing. The same issue occurred in Greece. Modern spoken Greek was rather different from classical written Greek. Some proposed and promoted the *katharevousa* written language (an artificial compromise between vernacular and classical language, created in 1796). Finally, more and more writers adopted the vernacular or demotic language in their writing. In 1976, demotic became the official language of Greece.

Bureaucracy and Scholarship in Europe

Europe was less advanced in political organization than China. Rulers and their courts relied on family ties and brute force. The only working bureaucracy belonged to the Catholic Church. The clergymen (but not the aristocrats) could read and write and were often proficient in philosophy, theology and Church law. The universities arose to provide the Church with the scholars it needed. By the 11th century, the need was felt for the clergymen to be better educated, to be able to read and write in Latin, to take part in theological debates and to take care of the administrative tasks of the Church. Open schools for clergymen were founded in association with the main cathedrals, for instance in Paris and Chartres. In the 12th century, in Bologna, Paris, Oxford and other places with many schools, the teachers and students of all of them formed associations known as universities. The University of Bologna was recognized in 1088. Its main emphasis was on the study of civil and canon (or ecclesiastical) law. The University of Paris, recognized in 1158, specialized in theology and became the main theological institution of the Catholic Church. In all universities, before

specialization in Theology or the Law, the students attended the Faculty of Arts as a general propaedeutic. The universities provided the Church with abundant and well educated clerks, capable of fulfilling the bureaucratic needs of Medieval Europe.⁴

Later on, in the Renaissance, the humanists tried to separate scholarship from the Church and to reconnect to the culture of Antiquity. Humanism and humanists appeared. The humanists were experts in classical languages (Latin and Greek), capable of reading the works of the classics of Antiquity and to appreciate and share their sense for beauty and pleasure. Erasmus of Rotterdam and Pico della Mirandola were famous humanists.

Only in the 19th century did a civil, secular and meritocratic bureaucracy become established in Europe. In Prussia, Karl August von Hardenberg (1750–1822) and Heinrich Friedrich Freiherr vom Stein (1757–1831) promoted the so-called Hardenbergschen Reforms. In France, after the French Revolution had abolished the feudal administrative structure, Napoleon Bonaparte established a strong centralized government, served by a large bureaucracy extending into every village and city. He also replaced the previous and chaotic mishmash of Roman, traditional and monarchical laws, different in every region, by a unified system of law, culminating in the Code Napoleon, a complete and clear civil code promulgated in 1804. In the following years a new Criminal Code and a new Commercial Code were also promulgated. Public education was brought under state control. Taxes became equal for all. For the first time in France, advancement in the civil service and the military was based on merit and not on family connections. The Code Napoleon itself specified that state jobs should go to the most qualified candidates, independent of birth.

Bureaucracy, Scholarship and *Rújiā* in China

Meritocratic civil service and bureaucracy are much older in China than in Europe. From the beginning, they involved writing and learning. The great contribution of China to politics was the development of a meritocratic civil service, not dependent on family ties to the ruler, but on mastery of a well-defined canon of scholarship. Civil servants were scholars. Bureaucracy was controlled and filled by Confucian scholars. Already under the Han dynasty, Confucianism (the *Rújiā* or school of the scholars; from *rū*, scholar) was made the official ideology of the State and the basis of the competitive examination system. Confucianism differentiates between *jūnzǐ* (lord's son, gentleman, superior person, noble man, ideal man) and *xiǎorén* (petty, small-minded person) or *shūmín*. A virtuous plebeian who cultivates his qualities can become a gentleman, while a shameless son of the king is only a 'small man'. Confucius allowed students of different social classes to be his disciples.

The new idea of meritocracy led to the introduction of the imperial examination system in China. This system allowed anyone who passed an examination to become a government officer, a position that would bring wealth and honour to his whole family. That was the main step in the invention of the modern civil service. The Chinese examination system seems to have been started in 165 BC, when certain candidates for public office were called to the Chinese capital for examination of their

moral excellence by the emperor. Over the following centuries the system grew until finally almost anyone who wished to become a civil servant or officer had to prove his worth by passing written government examinations.

Confucius praised the kings who entrusted their kingdoms to those apparently most qualified rather than to their elder sons. His main achievement was the setting up of a school that produced a civil service with a strong sense of State and duty. During the early Han dynasty, China grew economically and the need arose for a solid and centralized body of government officers able to read and write administrative papers. As a result, Confucianism was promoted and the corporation of men it produced became an effective counter to the remaining landowner aristocrats who threatened the unity of the State.

The Han dynasty approved Confucianism and made it the official ideology of the State. It became the basis of the government examination system. The three great philosophers of the old School of Scholars were Confucius (*Kong Qiu*), the founder, who lived around 551 to 479 BC, and, two centuries later, Mencius (*Meng Ke*) and Xun Kuang. There was tension and opposition between the optimistic and idealistic thought of Meng Ke and the realism and pessimism of Xun Kuang.⁵

Xun's thought inspired the new school of the legalists (*Fǎjiā*), founded by Han Fei and put into practice by Li Si as prime minister of Qin Shihuangdi. According to him, the ruler and his bureaucrats should break with the traditions of the past and establish new laws (*fǎ*), adapted to the present circumstances. Instead of empty moralizing, they should promote enforcement of the new laws through punishments and rewards, so as to maximize the power (*shi*) of the ruler. The legalist rule of Li Si under the first emperor was so ruthless and cruel that legalism acquired a very bad reputation. Soon, no philosopher, politician or scholar was claiming to be a legalist. The school disappeared as such. Xun's thought remained influential until the 10th century, but from the 11th century on, he was considered heterodox and ignored by the Confucians.⁶

Later important Confucian philosophers were Zhu Xi (around 1130–1200) and Wang Shouren (1472–1529). Zhu Xi formulated the definitive canon of Confucianism. This canon encompassed the oldest and most venerated texts of the Confucian tradition, the Four Books and the Five Classics. The Four Books were the Great Learning (*Dèxué*), the Doctrine of the Mean (*Zhōngyōng*), the Analects of Confucius (*Lùnyǔ*) and the book of Mencius (*Mèngzǐ*). The Five Classics were the Classic of Poetry (*Shījīng*), the Classic of History (*Shūjīng*), the Classic of Rites (*Lǐjīng*), the Book of Changes (*Yìjīng*) and the Spring and Autumn Annals (*Chūnqū*). It is difficult to know what (if anything) of these books comes from Confucius himself, as his texts were burned under Qin Shihuangdi.

Confucian hegemony continued under the Song, Ming and Qing dynasties. Matteo Ricci and the other Jesuits always presented Confucianism as the only true philosophy of China. The traditional examination system of China, based on the Confucian canon defined by Zhu Xi, was abolished in 1905, shortly before the collapse of the Qing dynasty and of Imperial China itself. Later on, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1971), scholars and bureaucrats were submitted to vicious attacks, in extreme and marked contrast to the whole Chinese tradition of Confucianism.

Early Chinese Contacts with the External World

The Silk Road was a system of tenuous land routes connecting Chang'an (now, Xi'an) with the North-West territories and further with Persia and the Mediterranean world. These routes were long and dangerous, traversing inhospitable deserts and high mountains. The name 'Silk Road' derives from the lucrative commerce with Chinese silk and other goods, carried along these routes by caravans of camels led by merchants since the times of the Han Dynasty. From the third century on, not only material goods travelled, but cultural influences too were imported by the merchants, travellers and monks arriving in Chang'an from Persia and India. One such import was Buddhism. Initially mistaken for a variety of Daoism, Buddhism was soon better accepted and understood.

A growing number of Chinese Buddhists missed a more direct and reliable access to the original Indian texts of Buddhism, written in Sanskrit or Pali and only available in India. Several expeditions of Chinese pilgrims went to India to collect such texts. At the beginning of the Tang dynasty, Buddhist monk, traveller, scholar and translator Xuanzang (602–664) made a 17-year expedition to India. He returned to China with 657 Sanskrit texts. He was received like a hero, but declined all political offers and retired to a monastery to translate the texts into Chinese.

During the Tang dynasty (618–907), Buddhism became the main philosophy and religion in China. Nevertheless, the bureaucracy at the court continued to keep to the Confucian tradition. In fact, emperor Tang Taizong improved the system of imperial public examinations for choosing civil servants. These examinations became even more open to all candidates, irrespective of social origin.

During the early Ming dynasty there were some limited openings to the outside world, as shown in Zheng He's maritime expeditions between 1405 and 1433. Admiral Zheng built a huge fleet of 300 large ships, manned by some 30,000 sailors, soldiers and merchants. They established useful relations in Vietnam, the Malacca straits, Sumatra, Sri Lanka and even Arabia, Somalia and Kenya. This experiment did not survive the death of Zheng He. The ships were broken up, navigation was forbidden and China returned to its traditional isolation. Some Chinese individuals remained in the countries visited by the Zheng expeditions: that was the origin of the Chinese diaspora in Malaysia, Indonesia and other places of South East Asia. Much later, the Chinese diaspora expanded to North America, where it suffered discrimination, exploitation and persecution, but also final economic and social success. Obviously, there are many similarities between the Chinese and the Jewish diasporas.

The Jesuits and Contacts between China and the West

There were sporadic contacts of Western merchants and missionaries with China under the late Ming dynasty. From 1517 on, there was a small commercial presence of Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and British traders in Guangzhou (Canton), but these foreign merchants lived confined in their quarters like prisoners, without any possibility of travel inside China or of establishing any meaningful personal relationship with Chinese.

The Jesuit missionaries arrived in Guangzhou in 1582. The Jesuits were Catholic scholars. The most intelligent of them, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), was admired for his wide scholarship. From 1598 on, he was allowed to reside in Beijing, on condition of not leaving again. He adopted Chinese customs and was granted access to the experts of the Court, with whom he shared his knowledge of mathematics and cartography. Even the mathematician Xu Guangqi was a disciple of the Jesuits. Ricci's intellectual adventure found no continuity and did not survive the end of the Ming dynasty.

In their numerous letters to the European home front, the Jesuit missionaries drew a flattering picture of China. Matteo Ricci admired the diligence of the Chinese population, the smooth working of the bureaucracy, and the morality of the Confucian tradition. Later French Jesuits wanted to impress King Louis XIV of France with their positive vision of China in order to get money from him for their mission. The Jesuits adapted well to China, adopted local dress, the Chinese language, and even the Confucian rites, which they considered cultural rather than religious ceremonies. For the latter, they were accused of heresy by other catholic orders. In 1773, the Pope ordered the dissolution of the Jesuit order.

The Western reception of the picture the Jesuits drew of China was decisive in the formation of the European image of the country, influencing, for instance, European intellectuals such as Leibniz and Voltaire. They contributed to creating a favourable attitude to all things Chinese in Europe. Even in decoration, 'chinoiserie' became quite fashionable.

The philosopher and polymath Gottfried W. Leibniz (1646–1716) was an avid reader of the letters of the Jesuits. He became very interested in the hexagrams and trigrams of the *Yijing*. The famous French writer-*philosophe* Voltaire (1694–1778) was intent on attacking the power of the Catholic Church. He used the information provided by the Jesuits themselves on the high standards of morality and governance among the Chinese to show that you do not need the Christian religion to achieve those ideals. Between 1740 and 1760, Voltaire repeatedly compared China favourably with Europe. Already in his *Lettres philosophiques*, he describes China as 'la nation la plus sage et la mieux policée du monde' (the wisest and best governed nation in the world). He even believed that the emperor Qianlong (1711–1799) was an ideal 'philosopher-king' and composed poems in his honour. Voltaire emphasized especially the (then) revolutionary idea of replacing the nobility of blood with one of virtue, an idea he attributed to Confucius. He also wrote some poems in honour of Confucius, whom he conceived of as a rationalist and enlightened philosopher.

The Chinese were ethnocentric in a literal sense: they thought they occupied the centre of the world. The only name they had for their own country was – and still is – *Zhōngguó*, 'the land at the centre'. During the Ming dynasty there had been some limited openings to the outside world, especially since the arrival of the Jesuits. When the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1912) came to power, politically imposing its authority but culturally adopting Chinese traditions, China retreated into isolationism, conservatism and self-sufficiency. The anecdote of the encounter at the end of the 18th century between the Chinese emperor Qianlong and Lord Macartney, envoy of

the British king George III, is well known and typical of the way of thinking of the Qing. Macartney's demands for contacts and commerce were flatly rejected, as China already had everything it needed.

Western Thinkers Visiting China in the 20th Century

Around 1920, only eight years after the collapse of the Qing dynasty and the abdication of Puyi, China was already open enough to become interested in foreign ideas in science, philosophy and ways of life. Notwithstanding the many convulsions China endured in the first half of the twentieth century, the country slowly opened up to Western culture. This process was encouraged by the visits of some outstanding Western thinkers and intellectuals.

Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century, was invited to spend a year lecturing in China. Russell and his wife Dora arrived by ship in Shanghai in October 1920. Russell was received with full honours as a great thinker. He was based in Beijing, but gave lectures across the country. His first six months were happy. Afterwards he contracted a disease and almost died of pneumonia. Dora became pregnant. They went back to England in August 1921. Witnessing a China in turmoil – warlords, demonstrations, strikes, imperialist threats – Russell soon developed a marked empathy for all things Chinese. He had a great fondness for many aspects of the Chinese cultural tradition. For their part, the Chinese looked to Russell partly for ideas about what they should be doing and partly for inspiration from a great mind. One of the founders of analytic philosophy and a trenchant radical, upon his return to Britain, Russell quickly published *The Problem of China* (1922), a volume in which he collected his Chinese reflections, observations and experiences.

Russell's trip to China overlapped with John Dewey's extended lecture tour during what has come to be known as the period of Chinese Enlightenment. John Dewey (1859–1952) was one of the leading American intellectuals of his time, a professor at Columbia University in New York, a famous educator and one of the founders of pragmatism in philosophy and functionalism in psychology. He made a two-year trip to China from 1919 to 1921. This experience influenced his social and political outlook. Dewey came to understand China on its own terms, rather than from a Eurocentric perspective. China provided a unique vantage point for Dewey to observe international politics, which led him to reconsider the meaning of internationalism in his political thought.

Several Chinese students in psychology and education continued to study with Dewey at Columbia University. Two of the most prominent Chinese philosophers and intellectuals of the first half of the 20th century, Hu Shi and Feng Youlan, had been students of Dewey at Columbia and were strongly influenced by pragmatism. Hu Shi (1891–1962) promoted a modern, pragmatic, scientific, and liberal turn in Chinese thought. He invited Dewey to lecture in Shanghai. He induced the shift to vernacular (instead of classical) language in Chinese writing. He was president of Beijing University and later of the Academia Sinica in Taipei. Feng Youlan (1895–1990) obtained his PhD

at Columbia. He taught at Tsinghua University. He wrote the first modern *History of Chinese Philosophy* (1934), which became the standard textbook on the subject.

The Chinese encountering Western intellectuals such as Bertrand Russell and John Dewey around 1920 already went beyond their mutual traditional canons of scholarship. They were creative and rational thinkers, somehow heterodox with respect to established views and cultural stereotypes. They were searching for new solutions, not just preaching their own traditions.

Not only Western philosophers visited China. The Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) came to China twice, first in 1924, when he stayed for several months, and then again in 1928. And it was not only philosophers and poets that visited China, but also great scientists, such as Norbert Wiener (1894–1964), famous mathematician and inventor of cybernetics at MIT, who spent the academic year 1935–1936 as a visiting professor at Tsinghua University. By the end of his stay he had adapted well to China and was even able to speak Chinese. A small but active group of Chinese physicists engaged with the new developments in world science and assured that Einstein's ideas met with a smooth reception in China. They survived their rejection by the ideologues of the Cultural Revolution, and are alive and well again.⁷ The influence of these scientists bore fruit at Tsinghua University in the second half of the 20th century. Professor Yang Chen Ning was awarded the 1957 Nobel Prize in Physics. Shing-Tung Yan received the 1982 Field Medal in Mathematics. Some other Tsinghua professors, such as Liang Qichao and the already mentioned Feng Youlan, made significant contributions to philosophy.

Shared Values and Wrong Traditional Solutions

Both Western humanities and Confucian scholarship are past-oriented. They fulfil a valuable social function by preserving the cultural heritage, but incur the risk of losing touch with the development of today's globalized world and with the dramatic increase in knowledge and communication brought about by modern science and technology. The same can be said of other cultural domains, such as medicine, where Europe and China have shared values (health, in this case), but have been offering different but equally wrong traditional solutions. Traditional medicine, in China and in the West, has been based on non-existing entities and fictions such as acupuncture meridians and Hippocrates humours.

The interest in health (*jiànkāng*) has always been obvious and intense in Daoism. It is also visible in the many varieties of fitness and martial arts exercises, such as *tàijíquán*, which emphasizes relaxation and serenity; *qigōng*, a system of deep breathing exercises to cultivate the force of life; and kung fu (*gōngfū*).

According to traditional Western Hippocratic medicine, there are in the human body four fluids or humours. Each human being has his own balance of these humours. As long as the humours are in equilibrium, the individual is healthy. Diseases arise through the imbalance of the humours. The four humours are: blood (whose predominance leads to the sanguine temperament); phlegm (which leads to the phlegmatic temperament); black bile (melancholic temperament), and choleric

humour (leading to choleric temperament). The problem for traditional Western Hippocratic medicine is that the humours do not exist and the theory of disease as an imbalance of humours is wrong. Bloodletting was the main therapeutic procedure of traditional Western Hippocratic medicine. It was applied to all types of diseases and ailments. The problem is that it did not work at all. Most of the time the health of the patient deteriorated through repeated bloodletting. Something similar happens today with Homeopathy.

Traditional Chinese medicine also relied on false theoretical foundations, based as it was on anatomical notions such as acupuncture points and meridians and physiological concepts such as *qi* (circulating life force) that do not correspond to anything observable in the human body, even if they are so often talked about or represented in paintings and sculpture models that practitioners find them familiar. Acupuncture and moxibustion are traditional therapeutic procedures that are supposed to be efficient in preventing or treating all types of ailments, from pain to cancer, even if there is no scientific evidence to support this claim.⁸

Let me finish by saying something about the value of benevolence and how it affected women's feet. Confucius had put benevolence (*rén*) and righteousness (*yì*) at the centre of his teachings. Benevolence is the supreme virtue. According to Meng Ke, humans do not differ much from other animals, but they differ in the heart (*xīn*). According to him (and to Aristotle) we think and deliberate and feel with the heart. The wise man follows the noblest part of his body, the heart. According to Meng, in the heart there are four tendencies or sprouts that point the right way to go; the first is compassion, which leads to benevolence. The second is shame, which leads to righteousness. Besides benevolence and righteousness, there is the observance of rites (*lǐ*) and wisdom (*zhì*).

The forces of randomness often take the upper hand in cultural evolution under conditions of isolation, leading sometimes to the widespread adoption of clearly pathological traits. A textbook case is the custom of foot binding (*chánzú*), literally 'bound feet', practised on young girls and women in China for approximately 1000 years, beginning in the tenth century under the Song dynasty (960–1279) as imitation among the courtly elite of the prized small feet of a famous concubine. Foot binding was the custom of applying painfully tight bindings to the feet of young girls to prevent further healthy growth and to produce small, sickly feet, unable to carry the weight of the body and to prevent normal walking and work. Foot binding became popular as a means of displaying status (women from wealthy families did not need to work and could afford to have their feet bound). The practice became common among all but the lowest of classes. Mothers insisted on their daughters getting their feet bound, for fear that unbound girls would not get married.

After the Qing started their rule of China in 1644, Manchu women were forbidden to bind their feet by an edict from the Emperor, but the majority of Han (Chinese) girls had their feet bound. These women were condemned to be invalids for the rest of their life, enduring constant pain, infections and difficulties in walking. The Empress Dowager Cixi issued an edict forbidding foot binding to appease foreign criticisms, but it was rescinded a short time later. In 1911, after the fall of the Qing Dynasty,

the new Republic of China (1912–1949) banned foot binding. Societies developed to support the abolition of foot binding. When the Communists took power in 1949, they maintained the strict prohibition on foot binding, which is still in effect today. Foot binding produced huge misery and pain in the women involved, but no benevolence was shown towards them, even if the spread of the custom coincided with the apogee of neo-Confucianism. Traditional Confucian scholars and bureaucrats did not move a finger to stop this cruel custom in the thousand years it was practised under their authority.

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